

THE GOLUB-YAVAN



**(On the Question of the Wild Man's
Existence in the Pamirs)**

by

Kirill Stanyukovich

Translated from the Russian
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Kirill Stanyukovich (b. 1911), professor of geobotany, has written numerous books on his subject, both for the specialist and the layman. In “The Golub-Yavan”, first published in 1959, the author shares with the readier his abundant experience of the years spent in the Pamir Mountains.



The East Pshart valley has nothing remarkable about it. It is a typical, rather wide Pamirs valley, with a dry river-bed which only fills in the hottest summer periods when the glaciers start to melt in real earnest. It is flanked on either side by gaunt mountain ranges. There is hardly any snow on their peaks, and the glaciers which hug the northern slopes in patches are small.

In the lower part, where the valley broadens out into terraces, are the fields of a big collective farm. Barley is sown there, although they are about 12,000 feet above sea level.

The gorges in the upper part of the valley provide summer pasturage for the farm's stock. You can reach these parts by car from the Pamirs Highway. But you can't get by car to the farthest end of the farm, beyond the pass.

So when we pulled up beneath the pass and saw Mamat and Sultan with horses and donkeys already waiting for us we sent the car back and pushed on on horseback.

There were five of us in the party: the Tashtambekov brothers, Mamat and Sultan, Tadeush Nikolayevich, Anastasya Petrovna and

myself.

The last lap of the ascent was fairly easy and we quickly topped the flat saddle of the pass. In front of us was the wide and flat West Pshart valley, its large flood-land area occupied by pebble-beds and flood-meadows, with broad, sparsely-grown terraces on either side. In the west steep craggy slopes converged into a gorge just wide enough to let the river squeeze through.

We planned to start our investigations of this valley next day.

A little way downhill stood the two collective-farm yurtas where we intended to put up for the night. The bleating of the sheep and goats settling round them for the night welcomed us.

It was evening. There was no warmth in the last rays of the sun about to plunge beyond the mountaintops, and the wind, invigoratingly cool only a short while ago, was bitingly cold. A herd of yak-cows trotted grunting past us on their way to the yurtas. The whole day long they browse upland, untended, and then, as though at a signal, hurry home to feed their young. But they are first intercepted by the milkmaids and milked, and only then given a chance to display their motherly sentiments, feeding and licking their shaggy calves.

We were received as guests of honour. The owner of the yurta took my horse by the bridle, steadied the stirrup and helped me alight. His son pushed aside the rug that served as the door and let us pass inside, where his mother was hurriedly spreading out blankets.

Taking of our bags and other travellers' paraphernalia we sat down and crossed our legs. The master of the house sat at our side and inquired for news. There was little, however, we could tell him for he got the newspaper regularly.

His wife laid a ring of *kizyak* (Sheep's dung mixed with straw, used as building material.—*Tr*) then worked the bellows and soon had a great fire roaring right in the middle of the yurta. On the fire went a *kumgan*—a copper jug on a tall leg. Meanwhile the master of the house offered me a bowl of tea which he had just made. In deference to his guest he had poured very little tea from the porcelain tea-kettle and offered the bowl with both hands. To be precise, he held it with one hand, steadyng it with the other, which is also a sign of deference.

The tea over, we insisted that supper be prepared with our food and

finally had our way. After Mamat had repeatedly invoked Heaven to convince our host there was no pork in the tins, a rice soup with tinned meat was put on the fire. At this altitude potatoes or raw meat would take too long to cook.

While the supper was being prepared we had time to attend to the usual chores: unsaddling the horses and turning them out to graze, pressing and putting away the few plants we had collected and jotting down the day's impressions.

The yurta was rather crowded by now. Besides our party there were two more guests, dignified old men with beards, searching for a strayed horse.

When time came to settle for the night the hospitable people were hard put to it finding blankets for everybody. But at last all were provided for somehow, and spreading our sleeping-bags on the blankets we settled for the night. The smoke hole in the top of the yurta was closed, the lamp put out and it became completely dark.

For some time nobody spoke. Then one of the old men called softly:

"Mamat."

"Yes?"

"Going far?"

"Till Chatyk Koi."

"Spending the night there?"

"Yes."

"Not afraid?"

Silence.

"Perhaps it's bad."

"What?" I interfered.

"Mamat knows."

"What is bad, Mamat?"

Silence.

"Well, Mamat, what is bad there?" "The wild man," Mamat said reluctantly. "What wild man?"

"Simply the wild man, *golub-yavan*. He lives in the mountains."

"What's this nonsense, Mamat? What wild man? Have you seen him?"

"I haven't, others have."

"Well, what does he do?"

"He shouts and throws stones down the mountain. He can carry off a woman and will challenge a man to a fight, will shout and beat his chest with his fist."

"You don't say so!"

"Don't laugh. If he throws you down he will crush you; if you win and throw *him* down he will cry loudly and run back to the mountain and die there."

"Oh, what nonsense, Mamat!"

"He is right," one of the old men said firmly.

"Of course he is," said the other.

"How do you know?" I asked. "Have you been to Pshart now? Have you seen the wild man?"

"Not now. I saw him before."

"When and where?"

"A long time ago, at Kyzylrabat."

"And why do you think there is a wild man here?"

"Everybody knows there is a wild man in Pshart."

"But who has seen him here? Aksakal, is there a wild man here?"

"Yes," the first old man said flatly again. "Three, one man, two women and one young one too."

"Have you seen them yourself?"

Silence.

"We must not speak about him," the old man said at last, "or he will come and make trouble for us."

From what they told us later it appeared that though nobody had actually seen wild men, it was accepted as a fact by some that they existed somewhere in Pshart. They wore no clothes, we were told, were covered with fur and ate whatever they found in the mountains. They did not like ordinary humans and it wasn't wise to sleep out by yourself in those parts.

For a long time I argued with them, trying to convince them that it was all nonsense. I silenced them at last but they did not seem to be convinced.

Then Tadeush Nikolayevich cut in with the remark that if we were not careful enough we might one fine morning miss Anastasya Petrovna, whereupon we all laughed. That is, except the old men.

They kept a grave silence.

Though we had the last laugh I could not go to sleep for long afterwards, remembering things buried deep in my memory.

The first time I ever heard about the *golub-yavan* was from an old Kirghiz whom I met in Kyzylrabat back in 1935. He claimed that, in his youth, when wandering from pasture to pasture with his flocks in Togdum-bash-Pamir, he once had to leave a valley with good pastures because of a wild man who carried away sheep and scared the people by shouting loud in the mountains.

The second mention came in 1936 in the vicinity of Altynmazar. It was evening when our heavily-loaded caravan bound for Altynmazar came to the Sauk Dara River, beyond which our destination lay. Fording a swollen river at night when the horses are tired was risky. Nevertheless that was precisely what my local workers demanded, saying that it was impossible to spend the night there because a wild man lived in the vicinity. He was sure to come in the night and then there would be trouble for everybody. "This place belongs to him," they insisted. When we arrived in Altynmazar a Kirghiz woman told me that some time ago she had seen a wild man near the mouth of the Sauk Dara. She hid among the boulders and he passed her higher up the slope, shouting loudly, and disappeared.

In 1937, when I was ill for close on a week in my friend Jamagul's yurta near the Togar Katy Pass, people talked a lot about a *golub-yavan* who had "come again" from Langar or, perhaps, Sarez, and now wandered round Bulunkul. People should not go about alone, they said, lest something happened to them. Jamagul told me that a long time ago, "under the tsar", he saw two wild men from afar: they walked high up the slope, "dug in the earth and ate grass", probably some kind of roots.

He then said that the *golub-yavan* generally hid at the sight of human beings, as he was afraid of them, so it was difficult to see one. There were no longer any wild men round, he added, but before "there really were". However, if I met one I was not to be afraid, but just to shout a little and the *golub-yavan* would go away.

I heard more stories about the wild man in Kyzylrabat and Alai. But I must confess I could not bring myself to believe any of the story-tellers.

Ratsek, a well-known mountaineer, told me that when he was working in the vicinity of the Inylchek glacier his guide had told him that wild men lived in a crevice there.

If one were to trust these stories and try to piece them together the following picture would emerge.

The wild man, *golub-yavan*, has been seen by local people in the most inaccessible and totally uninhabited regions of the Pamirs, in the valleys of the West Pshart, lower Murgab and other rivers flowing into Lake Sarez from the south, and in the vicinity of the lower Baland Kiik, Kainda and Sauk Dara. Except for the face and hands the wild man is entirely covered with hair. He does not appear to know the use of either fire or tools but on occasion has been seen to throw stones or sticks. He avoids people and eats roots and small animals, hares or marmots, which he chases or kills with a stone. In wintertime he can run down in the deep snow a mountain sheep or goat. He is a great traveller and does not appear to keep to one permanent den.

People used to meet him much more often in the past than now.

But suppose all this is a mistake and the people of the Pamirs take a bear for a wild man, as was the case, E.M. Murzayev tells, in parts of Mongolia where bears were unknown? No, this must be ruled out, for the Pamirs people, who often hunt the bear, know all its ways to perfection.

But that still doesn't make all these stories trustworthy. In fact, plenty of local people give no credence to them.

Jurmamat Musayev, Chairman of the Lenin Path Collective Farm in the Pamirs, has for one repeatedly pooh-poohed all such reports as myths. And he knows the district as well as his own pocket. Two old hunters from the same farm,

Uljachi Urazali and Mamat Rokhopov, who have been all over the Pamirs, are quite positive that they have never met a wild man or seen any signs of him anywhere. Urazali said once, "Maybe there were *golub-yavans* in places before but there are none anywhere now."

And finally, can we believe those who say they have seen the *golub-yavan*? The easiest answer would be a negative one, for none of these cases have ever been authenticated. Nor has ever any material evidence of the creature's existence been found. Even if they do exist there can be no more than a few dozen of them in the whole of Central

Asia, deep in the most inaccessible parts of it. And living as they do in the severest conditions, not far from the snow-line, they should be gradually dying out.

Somewhere at this stage I finally slid into sleep. We got up early. The sun was still behind the mountaintops but it was fairly light, and there was a nip in the air, and when we mounted and set out downhill thin ice crunched underfoot and the grass was white with hoarfrost.

Our main interest in the West Pshart valley was its trees and shrubs. There are hardly any in the Pamir Mountains, or, rather, there are so few that it doesn't matter.

Now for a scientifically-substantiated development of mountain areas a few natural boundaries have to be established. For instance, the snow-line, the tree-line and the highest altitude at which individual species grow.

That is exactly what we were after. The idea was to start from the head of the valley and go all the way down to establish these lines for West Pshart.

The first shrubs we met proved to be the false tamarisk. They were stunted, miserable creepers whose shoots hugged the ground, all but lost in the grass. They grow on pebble-beds along the river at an altitude of about 14,000 feet. That was actually the first of the lines we were interested in, the highest point where certain creeper-type plants occur.

As we pushed on downhill the false tamarisk grew in stature. At first it was just two to three inches high. But when we had covered about two miles and were 300 feet or so lower there were specimens 10-12 inches high.

Then the river entered the gorge; precipitous dins towered above us left and right and everything was at once different. There were no more cold gusts of wind, the temperature rose and we discarded our sheepskins. The crystal-clear waters of the river splashed gaily as it sped along, bound by shrubby banks. No longer creepers, the shrubs—mostly varieties of the willow—stood over a yard tall. *Comarum Salesovianum* in full bloom displayed its white, star-shaped flowers. The debris at the foot of the inclines were overgrown with shrubby cinquefoil and the tall bushes of Turchaninov's wormwood and winter fat.

It was windless and warm in the West Pshart canyon. The lower we descended the taller the shrubs became. The luxuriant growths of the willow and false tamarisk, covering every available square foot, first reached horse-shoulder, then topped the rider.

Presently there was a joyous cry, "A tree!" And indeed there it was, our first tree, a slender willow of about ten feet, hardly taller than the surrounding shrubbery. But it was a tree nonetheless, trunk, branches and all, and we dismounted to take measurements and photographs and to find the altitude.

All of a sudden there was a big pounding noise, the snapping of trampled shrubs, and heavy snorting. We straightened up in alarm—and remained rooted to the spot. Charging at us at neck-breaking pace was a troop of camels. Galloping they were, jumping over the brooks, crashing through the brushes. What could we do? The camels were closing in on us, rearing and kicking each other. I had seen plenty of camels before and had travelled on camel-back across deserts. I knew their lumbering gait and their jolting trot but I never knew they could gallop. Stories about people trampled or bitten to death by camels flashed through my mind.

Hide? But where? It was too late anyway....

The camels crashed through the last shrubs, loomed over us—and stopped dead. We were in a circle of grunting, gurgling, heavily-breathing beasts that stared at us dumbly.

They were well-fed beasts that had apparently been driven out into Pshart for the whole summer to graze unattended, as is done in those parts, arid had consequently gone quite a bit wild.

There was no telling from their flat, expressionless features why they had stampeded, what had made them stop, what they wanted or whether they were good-natured or otherwise.

Speechless, we stood inside the living ring—I gripping the ice-axe, Tadeush Nikolayevich holding his small-bore rifle at the ready.

"Mamat, Sultan, what do we do now?" I whispered, not daring to move.

"Nothing," Mamat replied.

Then he quietly went up' to a camel, tapped It on the neck and the beast turned its head and, with a nasty crunch, moved away. Then Mamat broke a willow twig and striking lightly drove the camel away,

then another.

Suddenly the whole herd turned about and went away.

For some time afterwards we could not settle down to our work again and kept glancing apprehensively at the camels wandering aimlessly within sight.

"Don't worry," Mamat said. "Sultan will drive them away."

Off went Sultan and, speaking to the brutes softly, began driving them further away. They proved to be quite docile, but we could see from Sultan's stiff movements and lack of assurance that he too was afraid of them.

"They're just playing," Mamat said. "They haven't seen people all summer. The camel goes about, grazing, quite alone. When he sees a man he runs to have a look. There's no need to be afraid of him."

We resumed our work. But whether the camels really longed for human company or something else had motivated these rather dull creatures' actions, they never left us alone that day.

After another hour's tramp down the valley we again heard the noise of hoof-pounding and shrub-trampling and were treated this time to the sight of a vicious running fight between two husky camels. One of them tried hard to bite the other's neck, while its adversary kept turning round for a nasty kick, producing, when lucky, a resounding rub-a-dub of soft hooves on bulging belly. Then they cantered past.

After a while there was some noise again and a single camel rushed up to us and stood stock-still. We were face to face for some time, the beast goggling at us stupidly, till it turned round and bolted off.

Apparently the camels were trailing us, for they caught up with us every now and then that day, stared at us, and then went away.

All the time I had kept my eye open for game tracks. When I was a boy and a member of the Young-Lover-of-Nature Society I was very keen on animal tracking. At that time A. N. Formozov's splendid book, giving descriptions and pictures of many bird and animal tracks, had just been published. I was to retain that keen interest for the rest of my life.

The sandbanks and paths of the West Pshart valley looked a veritable visitors' book to me.

The most common signatures were those of camels and hares. We

also saw plenty of hares in person. Whenever there was a slight broadening in the valley whole families of them scattered away in every direction. It was bad sport shooting them, however, for a hare would stop as soon as it left a bush or two between itself and us, rise on its haunches and peer about it so that all you had to do was edge forward a little, take leisurely aim and shoot.

There were also occasional mountain goat tracks. Then I spotted in a patch of sand, near an overgrown brook, the broad outline of a bear's clawed foot. About midday I found another bear's print. But I saw no tracks of the snow-leopard.

About 2 p. m. Mamat pointed out an unfamiliar footprint to me. It was narrower than a bear's and had no claws. The mark was in the dry sand of the path and so not very distinct. Whatever animal had made it was crossing the path and had stepped on the sand only once.

I wanted to sketch the print when a camel warning was sounded again.

And again the crazy beasts galloped right up to us to stare. When they at last turned away and I went back to the path the print was gone, obliterated by the camels.

It was in vain I scrutinised every patch of open ground after that. I could see plenty of all sorts of animal tracks, but no bear's, and none of the other, clawless type.

Making no halts we pushed on down the river. It was gone three in the afternoon when we sighted our first sea buckthorn, then clumps of birch-trees appeared. As we rode on and the altitude diminished, the birches grew taller and towards the end of the day's journey, about 5-6 p.m., fair stands of birch wood stretched all along the narrow valley.

At seven we stopped for the night near a lovely birch grove below some high cliffs.

After the desert Pamirs tableland—cold, bleak, lifeless, with just the wind howling among fawnish-coloured rocks—nothing could be pleasanter than to sit in the shelter of some birches and listen to the rustle of leaves and the merry gurgle of water and the singsong of chiff-chaffs in the bushes, and watch a fussy little bird scale the cliff face.

Having arranged our herbariums and finished our notes on the valley's plant life we summed up the results of the day's work.

They were quite interesting too. The first bushes had been seen at an altitude of about 14,000 feet, while the tree-line lay at 10,800 feet.

Tree life at such high altitude could undoubtedly be explained by the exceptionally good climatic conditions in that narrow canyon. And that meant farming could be pushed up to greater altitudes in West Pshart than in other Pamirs valleys. This valley gets enough sun for the successful cultivation of barley, potatoes, radish and turnip.

It was a lovely, serene evening, the sunset silhouetted the mountaintops, the river babbled nearby, leaves rustled faintly, one was hard put to it to believe that it was but a day's journey to the forbidding wastes of the Pamir Mountains.

We did not bother to rig up the tent but just spread out a sheet of felt and put our sleeping-bags on it. Mamat and Sultan arranged a sleeping place for themselves not far away, in the shelter of some bushes.

We had an excellent meal, for we had even brought grapes and a water-melon with us, the whole marred somewhat by the smoked sausage which proved too heavily salted.

We went to bed straight after the meal, worn out as we were by the long trek, full of events and jolly hard work, and were quickly lulled to pleasant sleep by the murmuring of the river and the steady champing of the horses.

I peeped out of my sleeping-bag a last time to examine the cliff above us. It looked firm and solid, not likely to topple while we slept, and we were far enough for any 'loose stones to fall short. Reassured on that score, I pulled my sheepskin coat over my sleeping-bag and within a minute fell asleep.

I awoke in the night with a feeling that something had happened. I listened hard but the silence was complete and, except for the sound of the river, I could not detect anything, not even the chewing of a horse. Apparently they had had their fill and were dozing, their halters giving a tiny clink once in a while. Presently I realised I was cruelly thirsty, all because of that ghastly sausage, no doubt. I tried to ignore it but after some time could not bear the torture any longer and, summoning up enough courage, I crawled out of the warmth of my sleeping-bag.

Outside it was cold. Picking my barefoot way among sharp sticks and stones, which seemed to litter the ground in profusion, and

cursing under my breath, I reached the river bank and lay down to have a drink. The drink was not long, for the water was so cold that after a few laps even the bridge of my nose felt numb.

When I came back, knocking a bucket over on my way, crawled into the bag and unfroze a little, I felt my thirst return, more fierce if anything.

It appeared I had wakened up Tadeush Nikolayevich, getting into my bag, which was next to his.

"I'm crazily thirsty," he said.

Neither of us said anything after that; I was as thirsty as ever but kept quiet in the hope he would go and bring me some water too, but he never budged. Then I gave it up as a bad job, got out again, hunted for and found a couple of mugs in the darkness, went to the river, drank a little myself and carried two mugfuls back with me. Sitting up in our bags we slaked our thirst at 'last. Then Anastasya Petrovna woke up, she was thirsty too but would prefer a nice bunch of grapes, if you please. And as I said I could also do with some grapes it was Tadeush's turn to get out, which he did, grunting and cursing.

To get the grapes he had to cross over to where Mamat and Sultan slept, and when he returned with the bunches he was cursing even louder.

"I heard they were awake, damn them, they even talked, but when I asked where the grapes were they wouldn't answer—just rolled into their blankets and played possum."

"Took you for a wild man," I suggested.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised."

We would have gone to sleep there and then but for some stones falling down the slope. Not that it worried us, for we knew we were safe. And indeed a few stones fell away from us, to our right, and crashed through the shrubs. It was anybody's guess what had dislodged them, the wind, or a wild goat, or a bear. All was quiet again and back we drifted to sleep.

When I awoke in the morning the camp was astir. Mamat and Sultan were feverishly getting the things together and packing the animals. Mamat said we must go back at once. When we asked why, he told us that the wild man had been there in the night and it was dangerous to stay.

"But did he do anything to you?" I asked him.

Mamat was appalled at my insouciance. It transpired that he and Sultan had not slept a wink the whole night and saw the wild man with their own eyes. At first the wild man threw stones from above, then he clumped all over the camp, muttering something, then he went away, throwing more stones.

There was plenty of material evidence too: scattered stones and broken bushes; upturned buckets and a ruined saddle-bag, whose contents —tins of food—we found scattered wide, badly-scratched and nearly flattened; the remains of a demolished loaf of bread and the dear imprint of a set of large flat teeth in the butter.

Tadeush Nikolayevich's evidence and mine to the effect that the two of us had walked about and upturned the buckets in the night was turned down flatly. We were told quite logically that, first, we oughtn't to invent things and, secondly, it was plain ridiculous to suggest that Mamat could ever take his chief for a wild man.

Our diffident suggestion that the bread might, perhaps, have been eaten up by the donkeys which could also have kicked the tins out of the saddlebag was swept away by Mamat who was absolutely certain he had securely tied up all the saddlebags for the night. Besides, even if the donkeys could have eaten up the bread, they would just never touch butter. So what about that bite in the butter which anyone could plainly see?

Nor did our attempts to find whose bite it was get us anywhere: the donkey whose jaws I prised open for dental comparison with the imprint in the butter, which Mamat was holding up for my convenience, suddenly snapped them shut on the piece of evidence. The next we knew the priceless imprint of a wild man's teeth was gone, gobbled up by the donkey. What remained instead was a clear imprint of the donkey's teeth, which I, in my ignorance, thought looked like the other one but actually was, on Mamat's authority, quite different.

Despite a long discussion which went on at breakfast and all the way back we could never reach a common view of that night's events.

But now, a few years later, I am in possession of some new information on the *golub-yavan* which I obtained from an old man I met in Pshart this year, looking for a strayed mare.

This worthy man told me that a few years before an expedition of five, one of them a woman, had spent a night there, in Pshart. Their chief was called Zor Adam (the Kirghiz for "big man", my name around there). In the night a wild man came, he shouted and threw stones from the top of the mountain, then he got down, ate some bread and butter and even bit through several tins and ate the contents. Then he wanted to take the woman with him, but Zor Adam fought him and threw him down and the wild man cried loudly and left for the mountains, throwing stones as he went. Many had seen this, for example Mamat, whom that worthy old man suggested I contact for further information. Unfortunately I can't cite the good man's name either, because, after a chance remark of my assistant revealing my identity, he thought he could not really stay any longer and immediately departed in search of his strayed mare.

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